Suggestion of a Trap

Startling Watergate Theory

Washington

If on the night of June 16, 1972 James McCord had told his team the coast was clear while he saw the last employee lock the door and leave the Democratic National Committee, history might have been changed.

In all probability, the team of burglars would not have been caught, the break-in would have gone unnoticed and the investigation and impeachment hearings against Richard M. Nixon never would have been held.

But McCord, who was watching the offices from across the street, did not tell his team for nearly an hour that the coast was clear.

Meanwhile, the building guard discovered the taped doors and notified the police.

Now comes investigative reporter Jim Hougan, a Washington editor of *Harper's* magazine, with the thesis that anomalies and discrepancies in testimony, and actual mistakes in covering that break-in, have never been — and cannot be — explained away as accidental or unlucky.

In an article entitled "Watergate Conspirators Dozed Fellow Burglars," in *Harper's* January issue, Hougan suggests that convicted burglar McCord, leader of the five-member team arrested in the Watergate that June night, deliberately sabotaged the break-in and "led his associates into a trap."

McCord was a career Central Intelligence Agency officer who retired after 16 years from his active agency role in 1972 to set up a private security firm in Washington. His only clients were the Republican National Committee and the Committee to Re-elect the President.

When the re-election committee was set up, McCord became its chief of security. Later, when Gordon Liddy's plan for disrupting the opposition called for putting decoy "bugs" on the Democratic headquarters telephones, McCord was put in charge.

Confusion over contradictory testimony about the break-in was disturbed by the Senate Watergate committee is impossible to resolve. Some at least three and possibly four break-ins had occurred in the weeks before June 16, and the witnesses could have been referring to one or another of the earlier incidents.

There it remained, undisturbed, until Hougan became interested while researching a libel suit filed by a former McCord

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employee, now deceased, against the Washington Star.

In his article — which may later be expanded to book length — Hougan indicts McCord on a long list of mishaps or inaccuracies, including:

• Placing the now-famous tape horizontally across the latch to the Watergate garage, so it was visible. If it had been placed vertically along the side of the door it could not have been seen unless the door was opened.

• Telling his colleagues at the "command post" at the Howard Johnson motel across the street that he had been delayed because he had checked the doors and "the tape was still there." Actually guard Frank Wills had found the tape and stripped it off.

• Insisting the operation should go forward after associate E. Howard Hunt learned the tape was missing and argued that the break-in should be halted.

• Much later, it was McCord who "blew the whistle" on the entire operation in a letter to Judge John Sirica — in an attempt, he said, to avoid a jail term.

There were other examples. But the most serious was the hour-long delay in informing his colleagues that the coast was clear although, watching from the Command Post across the street, McCord had seen the last employee leave, douse the lights and lock the door, and had watched the employee cross the street to the Howard Johnson restaurant with Wills, the building guard.

Even as he told his colleagues the offices were still lighted he not only knew they were dark and empty but that the guard was away from the building.

"I can think of no innocent explanation for the deception . . ." Hougan writes.

That hour, he says, may have changed the course of U.S. history: "Had McCord told the truth, and had the burglary begun at this time rather than much later, it would almost certainly have gone undetected . . ."

And it was, of course, the investigation of the burglary that began the long road leading ultimately to the House Judiciary Committee's approval of impeachment resolutions for abuse of power, obstruction of justice and tax evasion — and Nixon's resignation in disgrace.

So how, and why, did it happen?

McCord was a well-thought-of operative and administrator at the CIA, and an experienced investigator and security man, yet "at every juncture he made decisions that proved catastrophic, applied 'tradecraft' that was ludicrous, and misled his accomplices . . ."

"That a career CIA officer such as McCord should blunder so completely is about as likely as a podiatrist accidentally decapitating his patient. Indeed, it is even less likely, since incompetence will not suffice as an explanation," the article says.

But Hougan also says, "To know that McCord sabotaged the break-in and that another Watergate coverup continues into the present was not an 'end to the matter — merely a beginning."

The writer's investigation is continuing, and he gives high priority to finding the motive that led McCord to act as a double agent.

Hougan was asked in an earlier telephone interview where he would look. All he would say was that the CIA — particularly the counterintelligence division — is high on his list.

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